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## ENGLISH AS IT IS TAUGHT<sup>1</sup>

My text is a whole chapter. I shall have to deal with it in sections, and I therefore begin with "firstly;" I dare say it will take at least a "fifteenthly" to cover the whole subject. Firstly, then,

*Resolved*, That in view of the unsatisfactory results now being obtained by the teaching of English, a proper knowledge of which is fundamental to all sound training in public education . . . .

So much of the resolution for the present. I should be entirely satisfied to confine my discussion to these ancient, venerable, and respected platitudes. I could then proceed by arguments familiar to everybody, and which none dispute; most of my propositions would be commonplaces of human speech and thought; I could only insist afresh upon what is universally conceded; and this is in the main what I must do in discussing this time-honored subject. But our immemorial platitudes, once clothed in flesh and blood, informed with life and set to work, become unrecognizable, and I take it that what we need above all in our English teaching is to set some of our platitudes and axioms to work.

My paper must be, from the nature of things, simply an annotated edition of the resolution, and my first note is "unsatisfactory results," in the first line of the resolution. Are the results of English teaching unsatisfactory? For convenience, I shall annotate at the same time the phrase "a proper knowledge of which is fundamental to all sound

<sup>1</sup> Paper read before the North Central Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools in opening the discussion on the following resolution:

*Resolved*, That, in view of the unsatisfactory results now being obtained by the teaching of English, a proper knowledge of which is fundamental to all sound training in public education, it is the opinion of this association that the present so-called uniform English requirements tend to foster short, cram-courses, and the study of literature under premature and immature instructors, at the expense of drill in the forms of expression; that the narrow prescribed list of books is irksome alike to teacher and pupil; and that this association therefore declares its belief in an open list of books for reading and study; in extensive and intensive study of composition, rhetoric, and grammar; and in the thorough study of English through all the years of the preparatory course and the first two years in college as a prescribed study, to be taught with the same thoroughness as in Latin or Greek.

training," and let my note take the form of the following extract, which I cut from a Chicago daily paper of March 27, 1898:

The discussion anent the department of English at Yale grows lively if not edifying. Colonel S——, who is nothing if not combative, asserts that some students in the lecture room of Professor B—— have been seen asleep there. The colonel should not assume that such conditions reflect upon the vivacity of the professor as much as upon the possible occupation of the student upon the preceding night. Other students are reported to have been at the same time very wide-awake and giving the closest attention to the business of the hour. The real issue would seem to be, not the particular success of this or that teacher, but the relation of the subject of English instruction to others which form the essential parts of the Yale curriculum. Indeed, the question may be broadened yet more to inquire as to the relation of the study of English to the remaining subjects in any course of sound learning. That a thorough equipment in English and a complete mastery thereof is one of the most valuable results of a collegiate training needs no discussion. The time devoted to special discipline in this subject ought to be valuable and remunerative. Whether it is likely to be so, except as an adjunct to the most thorough classical discipline, does not seem to be settled satisfactorily. It is of the highest importance that the great universities should devise and demonstrate clear and practical examples of what may be done. The masters in English in these and former times have been trained upon other lines, and, as the sequel shows in thousands of instances, have been trained successfully. No one may safely affirm that equally valuable results may not be attained by what some are pleased to consider a new departure. But any one who is familiar with the methods now in vogue in many collegiate and preparatory schools and the results therefrom knows that they indicate a general want of appreciation either of what should be done or how to do it.

About a year ago I undertook an investigation of the proper course of study for the high school from the point of view of business men and professional men, sending out a series of questions to a selected list representing various callings in life. The answers throw some light on the word "fundamental." After all the criticisms made upon the high-school course by these men, who are not educators but intelligent citizens, what was left? First and emphatically, English. It was given first place by almost every one. Here are one or two sample answers:

A thorough knowledge of English is essential. Clearness and conciseness of expression are more of a desideratum in banking than in any other calling.

The aphorism, "Time is money," is the watchword of the banker. Every word must be weighed before it is uttered, and each word as spoken must leave no doubt as to its meaning. How can such a result be obtained without a thorough knowledge of the English language and how to speak it?

You note the stress I put on the study of English. I am still of the opinion that in the pursuit of our own language we are far behind Great Britain, where the better educated speak and write their language better than it is spoken and written in our own land, simply because our educators do not place the same importance on that study as is done in England, and for that matter, in Germany, Austria, and France.

These two are from business men. Now the testimony of a lawyer:

The value of English in a lawyer's training cannot be easily estimated. It is hardly too much to say that a thorough, critical, and accurate knowledge of the English language is simply indispensable to a first-class lawyer. Without this knowledge there cannot be precision in the framing of legal documents, nor accuracy in the presentation of legal arguments.

The instances given are only samples of the replies that would be received from nine hundred and ninety-nine intelligent non-educators in the community out of every thousand to whom the question might be addressed. A knowledge of English, not a theoretical knowledge, but a working mastery, is everywhere regarded as of the greatest importance and utility for practical life.

If we take up the ordinary high-school curriculum, with a view to ascertaining how and why the several subjects come to have their place there we shall find that they speak a various language. It is often easier to explain *how* than *why*. The determining feature in the past has been pretty largely the dogma of formal discipline. The determining principle of the future will doubtless be that of utility. Truth for truth's sake, learning for learning's sake, are obsolescent shibboleths. Just now, however, our curriculum is the resultant of strife between these two principles, a strife which is frequently illustrated in a single subject, as is the case with English. Why English should be included in a course of study is obvious enough: no other subject has greater utility, or is recognized by the public as having greater utility; it is primarily a useful subject; it is something that everyone must have for success in life. These are fundamental and sufficient reasons for including it in the curriculum. But, as a matter of fact, is it included on any such principles, and is it treated from any such point of view?

The fact is that the humanistic element — the culture, the disciplinary element — has received undue attention, and the formal training, indispensable and fundamental for all English teaching in schools, has come to occupy a minor place. In this development the influence of the colleges has all been thrown on the humanistic side; but more of that in a later note.

For my "secondly" I shall annotate this paragraph from the resolution: "It is the opinion of this association that the present so-called uniform English requirements tend to foster short cram courses and the study of literature under premature and immature instructors, at the expense of drill in the forms of expression." My first note will be upon the two words "so-called uniform," especially the "so-called." If you pick up at random from all over the country, a hundred college catalogues, you will find the statements of the English requirements identical in at least seventy-five out of the hundred, probably in the whole hundred. The great council of the English doctors has been assembled, and there has been formulated a confession of English faith. We have all been so glad to escape from the trials and difficulties that have beset us that we have subscribed our allegiance to the creed in the way in which such allegiance is usually subscribed — with very little thought of anything except quieting our consciences and "getting in with a good crowd." It is not respectable for any institution not to adopt and have in its course of study the uniform English requirements. Any school rash enough not to do that would be instantly read out of the assembly of the elect. These uniform entrance requirements are apt to be regarded as the highest expression of pedagogical wisdom, as the *summum bonum* of educational attainment. I would not be understood for a moment as minimizing the good that they have done, nor as criticising the admirable work of the committee that has prepared them — only, I think, we have attached more importance to that work than it was ever intended to possess.

As for the "so-called uniformity," any real uniformity should have two definite results: uniform courses of study in preparatory schools, and uniform examinations for entrance to college. In regard to uniform entrance requirements I need only refer to the bulletin on this subject, prepared by Dr. Richard Jones and published by the regents of the state of New York. With this you are all doubtless familiar. Time does not permit me to quote from it, but it showed very clearly that there was the widest divergence in practice among the colleges

represented ; some colleges laying emphasis upon form, others upon etymology, others upon literary criticism, others upon literary history. Students who were supposed to have had identically the same preparation had examinations that did not even bear a family resemblance to one another. This splendid uniformity produces such a condition as is described by a Harvard student, in the report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric :

All the students of the same class are at first given identical preliminary training in English, but as they approach their entrance examinations they are divided into sections according to colleges. Thus there are often gathered in the same class room at the same time fellows going to all these colleges, and each set doing different work under the same instructor.

The second test of real uniformity was that of uniform courses in the preparatory schools. On this point I have in my possession the results of an investigation made by Mr. Huntington, of the Milwaukee high school, with a view to ascertaining the English classics read and studied in the high schools of the most important cities of the country. Letters of inquiry were addressed to the instructors in English ; the answers to these letters indicate that in no small portion of these high schools no definite course of English study has been prescribed, the classics being chosen from year to year to suit the tastes of the individual instructors, and that of those schools where a definite course has been prescribed no two have anything like a similar one. There is practically no uniformity whatever as to the place assigned in the school programme to a particular classic ; the same book may be found in different schools in the first, second, third, and fourth years. If anyone has any doubt about the infinite variety of preparatory work, let him read the appendix to the Report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric made by the Board of Overseers of Harvard College. This appendix contains one hundred and fifty-eight of the accounts written by Harvard students of their own preparatory courses in English. Permit me to quote the following samples, which will give a good idea of the whole, and which hold the mirror up to nature, as we must all admit :

Five years before entering college I began my preparation, which was eventually to pass me into Harvard. During my first year I received little or no practice in writing English. The study of English, that year, consisted in reading a few of the books, a knowledge of which I must have five years after. We read the standards, Irving's *Sketch Book*, *Evangeline*, and *The Lady of*

the Lake. This work came only once a week, and it was very seldom that we had to write a theme. That year we began the study of Latin, which consisted in translating short sentences from the classics. We translated orally only being obliged to write the translation when we had an examination.

During the next three years there was practically no work in English. We were obliged, however, to write numerous translations from the Greek and Latin classics and one of the instructions accompanying each paper was that it was to be written in good English. This rule, had it been insisted on, would have done much to increase our facility in writing English, but it was not enforced. I do not mean by that that our translations were a jumble of meaningless words, but in a great many instances our words were not put together according to the English custom.

The last year in school we gave three hours a week to English. Our work consisted in the reading of the books that were prescribed in the Harvard catalogue for admission to college. Each week we wrote a theme, summarizing our reading, or describing some character in a book. That year we wrote our translations from the Latin and Greek, and the use of good English was enforced ; if the English was bad the mark was low.

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Although I do not believe in speaking ill of one's preparatory school, I feel urged to speak frankly in this case by the very nature of the composition. Speaking in a general way, I should say that my whole preparatory training in English was of a too elementary nature to produce the best possible results. Although I recognize the great importance of learning to use correct grammar and to punctuate according to set rules, yet, at the same time this is being taught, I think a scholar should be encouraged to express himself clearly, easily, and with force, which was not the case in my preparatory training. I think, too, an immense amount of good would have been gained if I had had practice in daily theme writing.

As for other studies, scarcely any attention was paid to the quality of English used. I thoroughly believe that a scholar should be required to use as good English in translating Latin or Greek, for instance, as would be required on an examination paper in English. I believe, also, that the quality of English used on a history paper ought materially to effect the grade. In this way, a scholar would soon become accustomed to speaking good English without any effort on his part.

As a final suggestion, I would say that the study of English ought to be made a more important part of preparatory work than it is now. Many teachers seem to think that mastery of the English tongue comes to an English-born person by instinct, and so the subject is pushed aside to make way for Latin, Greek and other foreign languages.

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I think that part of the system which provided for our writing upon what we had read did us the most good. We learned to imbibe the style and elegance of the author better, and it was much easier to conform our language to his than if we had been obliged to follow rules. We also, by reading different works, got acquainted with different styles. We learned to compare and distinguish.

As one result of uniform entrance requirements in English has been not to produce uniformity, another result, and a most unfortunate one, a result which attends the adoption of any formal creed, has been to stifle inquiry and criticism. We have all been so glad that that question, at least, was settled; whatever difficulties we might have in regard to entrance requirements in Latin, mathematics or history, English was settled. It was such a relief. We had the same feeling as though we had joined a church or taken a wife: one of the great problems of life was solved. This feeling that the question is settled is perhaps the greatest danger in the situation. Whoever thinks that any educational problem is permanently solved deludes himself and misleads others, for problems of education, like problems of philosophy, are always and must always be in process of solution.

Continuing my annotation, my next note refers to the "short cram-courses." This note shall be a brief one. It is possible to do in a very short time the work formally prescribed by the English requirements. As a matter of fact, all respectable secondary schools give a great deal more work in English than that which the requirements indicate—more work, too, than the colleges give credit for. In what way do the colleges place the study of English on the same plane as that of Latin or mathematics? Can a student fit for the examination in Latin in three months in the summer? Can he prepare in three months all of the work in mathematics required for entrance to college? Yet in English this has been done, not once, nor twice, but hundreds of times. A student says, "I am busy, I will read those English books up by myself," and frequently does it, and passes the examination. Where there are no entrance examinations, and the work must be done regularly in the high school, this danger is avoided, but it is avoided in spite of the requirements of the university or college.

I note next the "study of literature under premature and immature instructors, at the expense of drill in the forms of expression." My recollection of the resolution, in its unprinted form, is that it read



something like this: "The premature and immature study of literature." I think I shall venture to treat it in that way, as I am somewhat uncertain as to what a "premature instructor" may be, and the note on that subject might lead into the fields of biology or philosophy, where I should be lost. The premature study of literature, can there be such a thing? Of course it is all a question of point of view. Without dwelling on that, I shall speak of the contrast between the "premature study of literature" and "at the expense of drill, in the forms of expression." The way in which entrance requirements are now formulated inevitably places emphasis upon the reading and the study of certain works of literature. For the teacher in the high school it is easier and more attractive to teach literature in a certain way than to drill on the forms of expression. With the college influence to encourage them, what is more natural than that teachers should take the line of least resistance? The colleges like it better, the pupils like it better, the teachers like it better; every one seems to be satisfied, and all is for the best in the best of worlds. So the recitation period is occupied, it may be, with simply reading from some noble book, with an occasional interruption to ask for an explanation of the thought or to dwell upon the strength or beauty of some notable passage. No attention is paid to construction, and almost none to etymology; words are glibly mouthed which have no more meaning than so much Syriac to either pupil or teacher. Possibly, we should take it for granted that all necessary drill work has already been done, so that the time in the secondary school may be used for better things. This is evidently the idea of the department of English at Harvard University as stated in its latest circular.

All the suggestions in this report are meant to apply to those students—and those only—who, before entering a secondary school, whether "English" or "classical," have completed a course of English study substantially equivalent to that recommended by the Vassar conference (the Committee of Ten) as sufficient for "schools below the high school grade." In other words, the report of the department assumes: (1) that the pupil has acquired a rapid and legible handwriting; (2) that he has learned to read aloud with correctness and intelligence and without straining after elocutionary effect; (3) that he is able to speak English with grammatical accuracy and with tolerable clearness; (4) that he has been instructed in the orderly arrangement of his ideas in composition, and the expression of them in words as well chosen as the range of his vocabulary allows; and (5) that he has received such elementary instruction in literature as shall enable him to read

easily and intelligently any book not beyond his years. Unless these five matters have been attended to before the pupil enters the secondary school, no amount of time that can be allotted to English in a "secondary" course of four years will be sufficient.

Is it not certain that in this part of the country, at least, no such previous preparation on the part of the pupils entering the high school can be assumed? Perhaps if they did not assume it at Harvard they would not have so many special reports on their bad English year after year.

I shall leave it to others, in the main, to annotate the details of the remainder of the resolution. I shall be satisfied if you pass the remainder of it just as it stands. Still I ought, perhaps, to make one note on the "narrow, prescribed list of books." It is irksome alike to teacher and pupil, for, although the books studied in the schools cover a vastly wider range than that indicated in the entrance requirements, whatever books are studied must include those specified in the entrance requirements. Some of the books so specified are not, by any means, acceptable; it would be, indeed, difficult, in the judgment of many school men, to pick out books more unsuitable for use in secondary schools than some of those laid down in the college entrance requirements. The only reasonable principle upon which they could have been selected is that no one would ever read them unless forced to. Consequently, if the books are not to disappear from the known body of literature, the children must be forced to read them in school. There is no more human kindness in compelling a high-school boy or girl to read the horrors of the plague in London than there is to force him or her to a minute study of cancers as a product of over-indulgence in alcoholics. Yet both are being done in our high schools at this moment. Let us have an open list, *i. e.*, a list of, say, fifty or one hundred books, from which the instructors may select those which are best suited to their own tastes and training and to the ability and tastes of their pupils. Just that thing is done today in the case of students who do not have to go to college. Why should we make the path to college any thornier than it need be?

The most striking fact of the nineteenth century is the rise of great nations. Hand in hand with this development of political power has grown the spirit of nationality, and as a consequence, in every civilized country, there has been, within a very few years, a great increase in the interest paid to the teaching and study of the vernac-

ular. There was no question more important before the great school conference at Berlin in 1890 than that of the teaching of German. The German emperor, in addressing the meeting, said: "We wish to educate young Germans, not young Greeks or Romans." One of the great results of the conference was an increased allowance of time in all German higher schools to the study of the German language. Schools can make no mistake in emphasizing the importance of the study of the native tongue. The people will stand by the schools in every reasonable means to this end.

But the task is an exceedingly difficult one, though it is generally believed to be easy. It is difficult largely for the very reason that it is believed to be easy. The criticism made in the newspaper paragraph that I have quoted in the beginning is a fair one, *i. e.*, there is a general want of appreciation either of what should be done or of how to do it. What can be done to better this condition? We can adopt this resolution either as it stands or in an amended form, and then go home and forget the whole subject until next year, or we can as an association take up the study of this subject and devote to it such time as may be necessary to its settlement. If we can never settle it, then we shall be always studying it, which will be a most healthful condition. Would it not be well to appoint a commission for the purpose of issuing a carefully prepared course of study running through all the years of the secondary schools and possibly, too, through the first two years in college? The uniform requirements have been issued without any pedagogical justification, without any plan of work for teachers, without any suggestion as to how the books shall be distributed throughout the different years of the course, without, in short, any exegesis. Some of the individual institutions in this association have already issued admirable courses of this kind, but the work would be more influential over a wide extent of country if taken up by the association as a body. Whatever is done should be of such a nature as to give freest scope for originality and initiative on the part of the individual teacher, and it should not be along lines which tend to converge in an easily prepared and easily corrected examination. We are fortunately free in our association from that influence which has wrought mightily for evil in another section of the country—the influence of the examination. The uniform requirements are prepared by a commission which represents colleges and universities that admit almost exclusively on entrance examinations, and the only sensible objection this commission has been

able to offer to the adoption of an open list of books is that it would be difficult with such a list to prepare suitable entrance examination papers. God pity our higher education when its methods and aims have to be determined by the ease with which college instructors may make out examination papers ! As educators we cannot consent for a moment to be swayed by any such method as that and expect to retain the confidence of the people. We must stand for an independence that is not license, for a uniformity that is not identity, for a training which develops not alone culture but power, for an education which is not simply an accomplishment but which is the most potent instrument that we can place in the hands of the youth to equip him for serving himself, his country, and mankind.

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